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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PARTICIPATES IN WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY
COMMEMORATION, CITES U.S.-KOREA COOPERATION ON TB

REF: STATE 17303

¶1. Summary: On March 24, Ambassador joined with Korean Health Minister Jeon Jae-hee in Korea's main World TB Day event to commend the work done over the years by the Korea National Tuberculosis Association (KNTA). The Ambassador was the only foreign dignitary to participate in the commemoration, reflecting the long history of the United States and Korea working together to combat the disease. The Ambassador, in her remarks in Korean at the ceremony, noted that U.S.-Korean efforts to fight tuberculosis began with Peace Corps volunteers posted to rural clinics and now includes modern research at the joint International Tuberculosis Research Center (ITRC) to develop new TB medications. She also highlighted other USG activities such as support for the U.S. Global Fund.

¶2. Three weeks earlier, Ambassador and Health Minister Jeon launched the 3 1/2-year old ITRC as an independent foundation. The ITRC, based in Masan, South Korea, brings together researchers from the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Korean Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs (MHWFA) to discover new medical treatments for the novel strains of Multi-Drug Resistant TB (MDR-TB) and Extensively Drug Resistant TB (XDR-TB) that are emerging worldwide. While the incidence of tuberculosis in South Korea has dropped to less than one tenth of its 1975 level, MDR- and XDR-TB have gained a foothold in the South and reportedly are reaching alarming rates in North Korea. Since the research performed at the ITRC could benefit tuberculosis patients not only in North and South Korea, but around the world, this joint effort is an example of the U.S.-Korea partnership transcending the Korean Peninsula and engaging in issues of global concern. End summary.

Ambassador Highlights USG Commitment on World TB Day

¶3. On March 24, Ambassador joined with Health Minister Jeon Jae-hee in Korea's official World TB Day event -- a commemoration of the work done by the Korea National Tuberculosis Association (KNTA). The Ambassador was the only foreign diplomat invited to participate in the event.

¶4. The KNTA was established in 1953 with the goal of advancing the research and study of tuberculosis and of eradicating tuberculosis in Korea. It is well-known for its fund-raising and public awareness program through the annual sale of Christmas Seals and for its mobile clinics, equipped with X-ray machines, to provide medical exams to people in rural areas and the poorer areas of urban communities. It also collaborates with the Korean MHWFA in conducting clinical prevalence surveys and public educational projects.

¶5. In her remarks for the occasion, made in Korean, Ambassador Stephens highlighted the U.S. and Korea's long history in working together to combat tuberculosis. She emphasized the importance of the research conducted at the

ITRC and highlighted other tuberculosis programs, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, that the USG supports worldwide. The Ambassador recalled that she saw first-hand the suffering caused by tuberculosis when she came to Korea as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1975. She remembered that many Peace Corps volunteers worked with KNTA staff to help TB patients in rural clinics. She concluded that our joint efforts in health - from the early rural health worker Peace Corps days to the modern joint research for new medicines to combat drug resistant tuberculosis) are an example of how the U.S.-Korea partnership has evolved from being focused on the Peninsula to becoming a force for change and development around the world.

Bilateral Research Partnership Combating MDR- and XDR-TB

16. Three weeks earlier, on March 2, Ambassador and Health Minister Jeon launched the three-year old U.S.-Korea ITRC as an independent foundation at a ceremony in Seoul. Previously a program under the KNTA, the reorganization of the ITRC as an independent entity is a significant vote of confidence from the Korean MHWFA. The ITRC, a joint U.S. NIH-Korean MHWFA undertaking, is the most significant collaborative health project the U.S. implements with Korea.

17. The Center was established in 2005 with facilities annexed to the Masan National Tuberculosis Hospital, located about 40 km west of Busan. The Center is equally funded, USD one million annually each, by the U.S. NIH and the Korean MHWFA. Doctors and technologists from the NIH visit throughout the year in both a management and technical capacity. The primary mission of the ITRC is the development

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of new anti-tuberculosis medicines, especially to treat MDR- and XTR-TB. It also carries out basic clinical research on how MDR- and XDR-TB develop, techniques for diagnosis, training and education for TB workers, and collaboration and information-sharing with other international TB research centers. (Note: Although MDR-TB has been around a number of years, XDR-TB, which has a higher mortality rate, is a more recent phenomenon, gaining attention in 2006 when 52 of 53 people in an outbreak in South Africa died within a month of contracting the disease. End note)

18. Although the incidence of tuberculosis in South Korea has fallen from approximately 3 percent in 1975 to less than 0.3 percent today, it still has one of the highest rates of TB infections among developed countries. Moreover, of the 35,000 new cases of TB seen in South Korea each year, approximately 5000 of them are MDR- or XDR-TB. Masan Hospital is the national referral center for TB treatment failures in South Korea and therefore is unique in having the largest population of in-patient MDR-TB victims anywhere in the world. The hospital admits approximately 1000 TB patients in each year, and more than half of these carry MDR-TB. In addition, more than 5000 TB out-patients visit the hospital every year. With modern research facilities co-located with such a large population of MDR- and XDR-TB patients, the ITRC is well situated to carry out its cutting edge research.

19. Research to develop treatment for MDR- and XDR-TB takes place at numerous facilities throughout the world, but scientists have been frustrated at the lack of progress in finding new, effective medicines. In February of this year, however, researchers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University in New York announced a promising new treatment for MDR-TB. Working in collaboration with NIH scientists associated with the ITRC and using bacterial strains obtained from the ITRC in Korea, they found that two existing drugs used in combination were effective against 13 different bacterial isolates of XDR-TB. The two drugs are meropenem (also called MERREM I.V., produced by AstraZeneca) and clavulanic acid (produced by GlaxoSmithKline in combination with amoxicillin under the name Augmentin).

The drug combination could become the first new class of compounds introduced in the chemotherapy of TB in 40 years and the first effective treatment for MDR- and XDR-TB ever. But so far, the medicines have been tested in laboratory cultures only. Clinical trials involving MDR- and XTR-patients are necessary. NIH plans to undertake the clinical trails at the ITRC in cooperation with Masan Hospital.

¶10. Successful development of new treatments for MDR- and XDR-TB will benefit the world community, but will have a particular impact in North Korea. In its 2008 Anti-Tuberculosis Drug Resistance in the World Report, WHO reported that 6.8 percent of all TB infections in North Korea are MDR-TB. But official statistics from North Korea are unreliable. The Eugene Bell Foundation, a non-governmental humanitarian organization registered in South Korea, has been delivering medication, diagnostic equipment, and supplies to treat tuberculosis in North Korea since 1997. The Foundation in 2007 estimated that as many as 30 percent of all TB patients in North Korea may be infected with MDR-TB.

¶11. In her remarks congratulating the ITRC, Ambassador called it a center of excellence bringing together the combined weight of the science and technology of the United States and Korea to confront a 21st century problem of global concern. Collaborative projects like this, she said, will help propel our bilateral relationship to reach its full potential.

¶12. The Embassy's website (<http://seoul.usembassy.gov/>) and the Ambassador's blog in English and Korean (<http://cafe.daum.net/usembassy>) cover these activities and have elicited positive reaction.

STEPHENS